

The Self as Experienced Aesthetically: The Reflective Relationship between Immanuel Kant, Heinrich von Kleist, and Byung-Chul Han

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses aesthetic reflectivity in three texts: Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Heinrich von Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, and Byung-Chul Han's *Die Errettung des Schönen*. By examining both cognitive and physical reflections as presented in these texts, we gain an understanding of their respective aesthetic theories. Han's text resists Kant's aesthetic, which features mediated self-reflection, favouring instead objective beauty. *Über das Marionettentheater* provides the link between these two texts by presenting, rather than advocating, both aesthetic theories. Although Kant discusses beauty and Kleist uses the term *grazie*, both authors concern themselves with identity formation through the process of reflection. Kleist's text resists one discreet reading, leaving open numerous interpretative options, handing the aesthetic decision to us, the reader. His text, which features ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies, encourages self-awareness of the reading process itself. Therefore, whilst *Über das Marionettentheater* can be read as an illustration of Han's theory, it actually takes the reader through a process which is the very experience that Kant analyses.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, reflectivity, performativity

The question of the status of the apprehension of an object as beautiful is of considerable interest and perennial importance. Byung-Chul Han (1959-), in his recently published *Die Errettung des Schönen* (2015) (*Rescuing the Beautiful*), challenges one of the foundation texts of Western aesthetic philosophy, Immanuel



Kant's (1724-1804) *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) (*Critique of Judgement*). Heinrich von Kleist's (1777-1811) *Über das Marionettentheater* (1810) (*On the Marionette Theatre*), also quoted and considered by Han, is a literary text engaged with the same issues of reflectivity and the aesthetic experience.¹ The two concepts—reflectivity and the aesthetic experience—run through all three texts and will be my point of comparison between them. Reflectivity, be it the reflection of a mirror or cognitive reflection, brings into focus the role of the viewing subject during interaction with a given object or medium, as well as the concept of self-consciousness and the consequent divide between the intelligible and the sensual. *Die Errettung des Schönen* responds to Kant's philosophy, attacking its subject-centric approach and advocating instead the viewing subject's transcendence of itself during interaction with the external world. In this article, I will focus on the aesthetic experience *Über das Marionettentheater* provokes, questioning whether this experience is by nature Kantian or Hanian; self-reflective or self-transcendent.

As Ingo Breuer's Kleist handbook demonstrates, there are many authors, most notably Barbara Lübke and Bernhard Greiner, who connect Kleist's works with Kantian philosophy, but they do not read these texts as performative of Kant's aesthetic.² Tim Mehigan also demonstrates that Kleist, throughout his works, follows a broadly Kantian paradigm.³ I would like to offer a new perspective to this existing literature by following a different approach. In what follows, I undertake a reading of *Über das Marionettentheater* as a way of grappling with Kant's aesthetic theory. Others, such as Paul de Man, have related the text to the ideas of Friedrich Schiller, yet new insights can be gained by approaching the text through the aesthetics of both Kant and Han.⁴ I follow de Man's performative approach, whereby he interprets *Über das Marionettentheater* as eliciting an aesthetic, in his case Schiller's aesthetic. However, I contradict his contention that *Über das Marionettentheater* is anti-Kantian by demonstrating that Kleist's text, whilst illustrating a key element of the aesthetics of both Kant and Han, most convincingly encourages an experience of Kant's aesthetic. Although there is, as we shall see, one major similarity between Han's and Kant's aesthetics, insofar as they differ I argue that Kleist's text supports a Kantian aesthetic. In this article, I begin by outlining, in greater detail, the aesthetics of both Han and Kant, as well as a key similarity between the two. I will then discuss the ways in which *Über das Marionettentheater* illustrates both Han's and Kant's aesthetics, before finally demonstrating how it in fact most convincingly performs a Kantian aesthetic.

I: THE AESTHETIC THEORIES OF IMMANUEL KANT AND BYUNG-CHUL HAN

Han, like Kant, is concerned with the position of the viewing subject and the role of self-consciousness. Yet, unlike Kant, he desires an aesthetic experience that draws the subject away from self-reflection. This implies an aesthetic model in which the experience of the beautiful transitions from self-reflective (the Kantian model), to externalising. Han explicates this through examples of modern popular culture, which represent Kant's mediated self-reflection. He depicts the modern world as composed of self-generated projections reflected back upon the self; a narcissistic, individualistic world generated through "selfies" and Facebook accounts where, instead of interacting with that beyond us, we self-generate and self-optimize. In reaction to this trend, Han locates the beautiful not in this self-reflective experience but in the "other" in which one ought to lose oneself. I argue that he attempts to overcome the self-reflective aesthetic articulated by Kant, hence criticising Western subject-philosophy in general.

Kant's philosophical impact is evident in the works of both Kleist and Han. Kant's thought represents modern subject-philosophy which follows Cartesianism, namely the rational argument of those such as Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz. As Léo Freuler demonstrates when discussing the similarities between Descartes and Kant, Kant's position contrasts to the empiricists, belonging instead to the rationalists: "der Kantischen Position [ist] im Unterschied zu den Empiristen (Hume, Locke) und innerhalb der rationalistischen Strömung ... zu bestimmen" (the Kantian position is in contrast to the empiricists [Hume, Locke] and rules within the rationalist current).⁵ And, as Corey Dyck illustrates, the influences of Rationalism and Cartesianism on Kant were clearly significant, as reflected in Kant's emphasis on the viewing subject rather than on an "external reality."⁶ Furthermore, Descartes and Kant share a concern with self-consciousness. Cartesian thought leads, Mehigan argues, to "two traditions of thought—Cartesian rationalism and empiricism."⁷ Following in the footsteps of Descartes, Kant attempts "to reconcile the inner mental states arising from our individual 'monadological' being in the world with the empirically objective sense of the being of that world."⁸ For Kant, a judgement of the beautiful involves the observing subject experiencing the harmony of his or her cognitive powers (of *sinnlichkeit* and *verstand*—the sensual and the intelligible), leading to the experience of the person as a whole. Therefore, the viewing subject's apprehension of a medium leads to reflection upon the experience of this apprehension, in a purposive state (Kant's idea of the purposive will be discussed in more detail below). And so, although an object is necessary, serving the role of

medium for self-reflection, beauty is not externally located for Kant; his subject-centric approach is grounded in Cartesian subject-philosophy. A judgement of the beautiful exists, for Kant, in the reflective relationship between medium and viewing subject. It is by nature self-reflective and self-affirming.

Despite the sharp contrasts between the ideas of Kant and Han, one key similarity does exist, allowing Kleist to simultaneously demonstrate their contrasting theses and tease out and explore the contradictory aesthetic world-views. The similarity lies in the concept of the purposive (Kant's *Zweckmäßigkeit*). Kant adopts the term purposive to indicate a certain state in which the viewing subject apprehends a given object. A purposive apprehension is one in which the object is not (yet) cognitively subsumed under a given concept – it is apprehended but as yet serves no purpose; interpretation and utility are resisted. Kant considers the purposive essential for a judgement of the beautiful. Kant defines purpose:

wo also nicht etwa bloß die Erkenntnis von einem Gegenstande, sondern der Gegenstand selbst (die Form oder Existenz desselben) als Wirkung, nur als durch einen Begriff von der letztern möglich gedacht wird, da denkt man sich einen Zweck.⁹

(Hence we think of a purpose if we think not merely, say, of our cognition of the object, but instead of the object itself [its form, or its existence], as an effect that is possible only through a concept of that effect.)¹⁰

And, on the other hand, purposiveness:

Die Zweckmäßigkeit kann also ohne Zweck sein, sofern wir die *Ursachen* dieser Form nicht in einem Willen setzen, aber doch die Erklärung ihrer Möglichkeit, nur indem wir sie von einem Willen ableiten, uns begreiflich machen können. Nun haben wir das, was wir beobachten, nicht immer nötig durch Vernunft (seiner Möglichkeit nach) einzusehen.¹¹

(Hence there can be purposiveness without a purpose, insofar as we do not posit the causes of this form in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will. Now what we observe we do not always need to have insight into by reason [as to how it is possible].)¹²

In other words, following Kant's argument, in the case of a purposive judgement, the possibility of interpretation is available, but still in play.

As Jim Urpeth explains, "such purposiveness resides in the *discord* between the powers of the mind and only remains so insofar as this discord is *sustained* and

not dialectically resolved.”¹³ This purposiveness, as Urpeth argues, is “the source [for Kant] of the value of aesthetic feeling.”¹⁴ The resistance to interpretative closure indicates an open space whereby neither human concepts nor “objective reality” dominates. Or, as Andrea Rehberg expresses it, the purposive fills the gap opened by the “incommensurability [that] ... exists between the ideas of reason and nature as purposive”; the purposive “plug[s] the gap left by the unattainability of any objective measure.”¹⁵ It resists utility. Unlike Kant’s other categories of observation—the pleasurable and the good, both of which he classifies as interested judgements—the purposive is disinterested and a necessary component of Kant’s judgement of the beautiful.

The value that Han places upon this state is demonstrated by his discussion of the mystical. The mystical, for Han, is closely related to the attempt to re-incorporate the negativity of the other. It is part of the resistance to the capitalist dominance, which makes everything consumable. Han: “Die Entmystifizierung macht alles genieß- und konsumierbar. Der Tastsinn zerstört die Negativität des ganz Anderen” (the demystification makes everything enjoyable and consumable. The tactile destroys the negativity of the completely other).¹⁶ The mystical, for Han, represents an attempt to lose oneself in a reality, or experience, beyond the self. Inherent in this is the ambiguity of the “other” and an emphasis on the importance of imagination—much like in a purposive state—to engage with the “other.” From this follows his focus on the nature of that with which we engage (in contrast to Kant’s focus on the self). Following Han, the pornographic nature of certain visuals, for instance, destroys the imagination: “die pornographische Dauerpräsenz des Sichtbaren vernichtet das Imaginäre” (the pornographic continuous presence of the visible destroys the imaginary).¹⁷ The erotic, in contrast to the pornographic, exemplifies Han’s idea of the mystical:

der Erotiker unterscheidet sich vom Pornographen durch seine Indirektheit und Umwegigkeit. Er liebt *szenische Distanzen*. Er begnügt sich mit Andeutungen, statt die Sache direkt zur Schau zu stellen ... Die Erotik ist *allusiv* und nicht *affektiv*.¹⁸

(The erotic distinguishes itself from the pornographic through its indirectness. It loves scenic distances. It is satisfied with inferences, instead of displaying something directly. The erotic is allusive and not affective).

The distinction between the pornographic and the erotic is that between a one-dimensional and an ambiguous presentation. The mystical requires imagination and ambiguity.

Kant and Han share a desire for the un-consumable. Kant's beautiful is neither enjoyed as pleasurable nor consumed, but rather, is disinterested. Kant's medium is appreciated in a purposive state in which a definitive interpretative cognition of the medium is not reached. Although Han would have the subject lose itself further, perhaps this purposive state to some extent satisfies his desire for the pre-consumable, which characterises both the purposive and the mystical. Because the purposive requires the holding together of multiple potential interpretations in the free play of imagination, perhaps Han's "other," the un-interpreted, is incorporated. Like Kant with his purposive, Han values ambiguity:

[das Schöne] schirmt uns vom Schrecklichen ab. Aber gleichzeitig scheint durch das Schöne das Schreckliche hindurch. Das macht die Ambivalenz des Schönen aus. Das Schöne ist kein Bild, sondern ein *Schirm*.¹⁹

(The beautiful shields us from the terrible. But at the same time, the terrible shines through the beautiful. That characterises the ambivalence of the beautiful. The beautiful is not an image, but rather a shield.)

Although Kant does not specify hidden negativity as a necessary component of the purposive, Kant and Han do agree on the importance of ambiguity. For Han, this ambiguity stems from the object under observation, whereas Kant believes in the generation of a coherent, self-conscious perception which encompasses the ambiguity inherent in multiple potential interpretations. They seem to share the purposive, although perhaps for different ends within their argumentation.²⁰

In relation to their aesthetic philosophies, the key similarity between the arguments of Kant and Han, therefore, is the value they place upon the purposive apprehension. Although both authors claim the disinterestedness of the purposive (in the form of *Zweckmäßigkeit* for Kant and the mystical for Han), disinterested purposiveness plays a contrasting role in each of their respective arguments. For Kant, it serves as evidence for his self-reflective aesthetic, whereas for Han it aids in achieving self-transcendence. By contrast, Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater* leaves open the possibility for the reader to have both a Kantian and a Hanian aesthetic experience. Because it is in appearance literary rather than philosophical, seemingly disinterested, and resistant to argumentation itself, Kleist's text will serve, below, as the perfect case study for the exploration and exemplification of an aesthetic

judgement at play between text and reader. As Kant and Han both value the viewer's state of aesthetic judgement, *Über das Marionettentheater* can illustrate at least an element of both aesthetic models, although I argue that it encourages the reader to experience a Kantian aesthetic.²¹ In other words, it performs a Kantian aesthetic.

Before demonstrating this, it is worth briefly discussing the term “performative,” which is treated somewhat differently in philosophy and in literary criticism. In philosophy, it often denotes the process by which something comes into existence that would not have been there without the performance, such as in the social performance of a marriage ceremony. Whereas for the literary field the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines *performative* as “[a] kind of utterance that performs with language the deed to which it refers.”²² I consider the term, as used in both fields, as appropriate when analysing Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*. Indeed, Christian-Paul Berger suggests that Kleist's text calls for interdisciplinary treatment.²³ This approach, of the literary performance of an aesthetic philosophy, is a cross-disciplinary approach in line with Jacques Derrida's “deconstruction,” which links aesthetic philosophy with the reading of texts in an attempt to expose internal, unstable, and irreducible contradictions. When discussing Kant's aesthetic theories, Derrida demonstrates his deconstructionist and cross-disciplinary approach: “I *seduce* it: by treating the third critique as a work of art, I neutralize or encrypt its existence.”²⁴ Kleist's text, by constructing an experience that initiates a reader into an appreciation of a Kantian aesthetic, is changing that reader; the text is not simply read for meaning but rather performs an inclusive activity between reader and text. I will now further explore Kleist's playful aesthetic, discussing, firstly, the way in which it illustrates the aesthetics of Kant and Han, and secondly, demonstrating how it most convincingly performs a Kantian aesthetic.

II: ÜBER DAS MARIONETTENTHEATER AS ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE AESTHETICS OF KANT AND HAN

Whereas Kant and Han state their arguments directly and clearly, Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater* is characterised by irony, ambiguity, and resistance to interpretation. Although the text also concerns itself with ideas of self-consciousness and beauty, or, as Kleist refers to it, *grazie* (grace), its perspective on these issues appears to fluctuate and is characteristically unclear. This ambiguity is central to the text: while reading *Über das Marionettentheater* we are given the opportunity to decide upon the nature of our aesthetic experience, to decide whether the beautiful exists externally—for instance, whether we must locate it in *Über das*

Marionettentheater itself—or whether it exists in our awareness of the reading process, an awareness which the text encourages by frustrating our abilities to articulate a coherent reading. I identify these two options as representing the arguments of Han and Kant respectively, with their location of the beautiful externally and self-reflectively. The ideas expressed in *Über das Marionettentheater* correspond to those found in both Kant and Han, appearing to leave open the opportunity for either of the two contradictory aesthetic experiences. The text enacts these ideas by serving as a medium for the viewing subject. Whether Kleist's intention or not—I do not take it upon myself to address the question of intention regarding any of the authors—I suggest that the reader is placed in a position from which to decide upon the nature of the beautiful as either externalising or self-reflectively affirming. Kleist's text mediates, for the reader, an experience of aesthetic judgement. A central theme of *Über das Marionettentheater*, therefore, is that of the relationship between text and reader, and herein lies the similarity between Kleist, Kant, and Han. By resisting interpretation, *Über das Marionettentheater* communicates ideas regarding the reading process and, by presenting paradoxes and multiple potential readings, increases the duration of the purposive state for the reader—a state of ambiguity valued, as established above, by both Kant and Han.

Firstly, let us consider *Über das Marionettentheater* as illustrative of Han's ideas. Uncertainty, which is generated throughout *Über das Marionettentheater*, is central to this relationship between reader and text; it underpins our experience of the purposive. Primarily, it is the ambiguous presentation of the characters which fuels this uncertainty. On the one hand the characters, both the narrator and his interlocutor, Herr C, appear to support a Hanian argument—an anti-Kantian worldview—whereby grace (*grazie*), or beauty, is achieved through an absence of self-consciousness. Let us consider Herr C.'s use of the example of the marionette to illustrate his ideas about grace. He considers the marionette graceful because it has no *ziererei* (affectation). And it has no affectation because it has no self-consciousness; instead, the dance is completely in the field of mechanical laws: “ihr Tanz [ist] gänzlich ins Reich mechanischer Kräfte hinübergespielt” (their dance could pass entirely over into the world of the mechanical).²⁵ Herr C. further explains that affectation is unavoidable since we have eaten from the tree of knowledge.²⁶ Ultimately, for Herr C., consciousness destroys grace. The contrast between Kant's beautiful and Herr C.'s grace shows their respective ideas regarding the relationship between the self and the external, as well as the concept of reflectivity. For Herr C., consciousness, including self-reflection, is destructive of grace, whereas for Kant, it

characterises the beautiful. Herr C. presents an objective definition whereas Kant's centres upon the subject. If we were to consider Herr C. a reliable mouthpiece for the message of the text, it would mean reading *Über das Marionettentheater* as supportive of Han's striving for self-transcendence and in contradiction with Kant's self-reflective aesthetic model.

However, the characters are not presented as wholly reliable and the voice of the text does not appear to consistently align with that of the characters, so perhaps the text is not straightforwardly supportive of Han's ideas and dismissive of Kant's. As it is unclear how we ought to evaluate the opinions of the characters, the text's stance towards the two fields of thought, of Kant and Han, remains ambiguous. One important example of the narrator's unreliability involves his discussion of the grace which a boy no longer possesses. Despite desiring grace, the homodiegetic narrator of the intradiegetic narrative because of the dangers of vanity,²⁷ to pretend that he did not witness a moment of grace involving the boy:

doch sei es, um die Sicherheit der Grazie, die ihm beiwohnte, zu prüfen, sei es, um seiner Eitelkeit ein wenig heilsam zu begegnen: ich lachte und erwiderte – er sähe wohl Geister!²⁸

(but whether it was that I wanted to test the security of his natural charm, or whether I wanted to challenge his vanity, I laughed and replied that he was imagining things.)²⁹

The narrator is behaving as if he were an authority on how to obtain grace, yet he unselfconsciously exposes the role he has played in destroying the boy's grace.

By re-telling this story, the narrator of the extradiegetic narrative exemplifies not only his complicity in this destruction but he also seems unaware of having played this role, because he blames the loss of grace purely on the boy's self-consciousness: "er fing an, Tage lang vor dem Spiegel zu stehen; und immer ein Reiz nach dem anderen verließ ihn" (he began to stand in front of the mirror all day long, and one virtue after another dropped away from him).³⁰ The narrator appears foolish, lacking insight into the implications of his own behaviour. Furthermore, the intradiegetic narrative itself highlights the hypocrisy of the narrator: he presents the boy's self-conscious repetitions as responsible for the destruction of grace, yet he himself repeats his story. We are distanced from any moment of grace, as Herr C. defines it, by the fact that it is a retelling, a story within a story, and so not even a report of a moment of grace as such. He acts as filter, repeating a story in which he criticises repetitions.³¹

Seemingly unaware of the hypocrisy, he enacts, at the narrative level, precisely what he criticises: a loss of grace.

Not only is the narrator's behaviour hypocritical, *Über das Marionettentheater* contains further evidence of the characters' untrustworthiness. Herr C. suggests that "ein Tänzer, der sich ausbilden wolle, mancherlei von [der Marionette] lernen könne" (a dancer who wished to improve himself could learn a great deal from observing [the marionette]).³² This, like the narrator's hypocritical behaviour, is also ironic, because the dancers' striving to liken themselves to the grace of the marionette epitomises the affectation which Herr C. criticises as destructive of grace.³³ Like the narrator, Herr C. enacts that which he criticises.

It would also appear that we, as readers searching for intelligibility in the text, are guilty of affectation as Herr C. defines it, by destroying the grace of the unintelligible, ambiguous text. Yet, unlike Herr C., we become aware of the paradox and irony when we identify this affectation in Herr C.'s behaviour and in our own. Furthermore, the response from the narrator to Herr C.'s tale of a fencing bear indicates his unreliability:

Glauben Sie diese Geschichte?

Vollkommen! rief ich, mit freudigem Beifall; jedwedem Fremden, so wahrscheinlich ist sie: um wie viel mehr Ihnen!³⁴

(Do you believe this story, he asked?)

(Absolutely, I replied with encouraging approval; it is plausible enough that I would have believed it had any stranger told me, but it is even more plausible coming from you.)

De Man's wry comment also indicates his mistrust of the characters: "narrative authority, so it seems, can get away with any degree of absurdity," thus highlighting the narrator's limitations in believing Herr C. Moreover, de Man's description of the scene involving the boy standing before the mirror—an "almost equally fantastic tale"—implies further criticism of the narrator of the extradiegetic narrative.³⁵

By making us question the reliability of the characters, Kleist encourages reflection upon the nature of narrative. Or, as Greiner expresses it, "die Aussage des Textes verschiebt sich von den Argumenten, die die Disputanten vortragen, auf die Umstände ihres Vortrags" (the statement of the text is shifted from the argument, which the debaters present, to the circumstances of their speech).³⁶ At first sight we appear caught in a trap: reflection is by nature repetitive and thus destructive of grace, and for this reason, if we try to understand *Über das Marionettentheater*, we are

destined to commit the same mistake as the narrator, by repeatedly reading the text in a search for meaning. Or, as Breuer succinctly puts it, the text “verführt [uns]” (seduces us); it “‘verwirkliche’ auf subtile Weise das über die Marionetten Gesagte” (actualises in a subtle way that which is said about the marionette),³⁷ or, similarly, “poetologisch gewendet ließe sich diese Konstellation als performativer ... Schreibakt charakterisieren” (poetologically speaking the constellation allows itself to be characterised as a performative act of writing).³⁸ Each layer of repetition (emphasised by the nature of the intradiegetic and extradiegetic narratives—a retelling of memories) highlights the transience of grace, which in a sense is accessible, but not in the same way upon reflection. The characters enact the entrapment which we as readers experience whilst attempting to find meaning in the text.

Über das Marionettentheater seems to prove the impossibility of maintaining the original balance, of maintaining the purposive. Greiner agrees with this performative interpretation: “in den Verschiebungen und Selbstwidersprüchen seiner Argumentation entfaltet der Essay das Paradox seines Gegenstandes” (in the adjustments and self-contradictions of its argumentation the essay displays the paradox of its subject).³⁹ That is why we cannot stare grace in the face, and why Kleist must use analogies and metaphors to approach the moment “from the backdoor,” to see if paradise “von hinten irgendwo wieder offen ist” (is open again somewhere from behind).⁴⁰ This transience demonstrates Kant’s idea of the purposive whereby ambiguity is ruined once labelled, once subsumed within a given cognition. Simon Malpas supports this idea when he quotes François Lyotard in his discussion of Kant, arguing that *Über das Marionettentheater*, by presenting the paradox of a destructive reading, would seem to demonstrate Kant’s aesthetic by presenting “the fact that the unrepresentable exists.”⁴¹ This collapse of ambiguity places the reader in a difficult position, where to re-read the text in an attempt to develop a reading—for instance, to read it, as I do, in light of Kant’s aesthetic—is to commit a similar mistake as the narrator and Herr C., striving to attain grace but “committing” affectation. It therefore appears unconvincing when Günter Figal tentatively suggests that one “am Schluss nur zurückschauen, den Text rekapitulieren, am besten noch einmal lesen muss, um zu erfahren, was aus dem Zwang der Absichtlichkeit herausführt” (must at the conclusion only look back, recapitulate the text; best to read it once more in order to discover what leads out of the necessity of intentionality).⁴² Instead, the text mocks us; the very theme of our inability to unite the sensual and intelligible is illustrated by our struggle to find intelligibility in the text.

We appear trapped out of grace. Or, in Kantian terms, we cannot avoid the transition from the purposive into an ends-driven interpretation, whereby each element of the text serves the purpose of fitting a given reading. Kleist makes us the subject of our own study, because by interpreting these scenes we have ourselves slipped from, in Kant's terms, a purposive to a purpose-driven reading. This paradox—of interpretation itself excluding us from the purposive—is central to the text. As Beda Allemann expresses it, the text has “eine *fundamentalpoetologische* Funktion, getarnt durch Paradoxien—und nicht nur getarnt, lebend vielmehr aus dem Geist des recht verstandenen Paradoxons” (a fundamentally poetological function, camouflaged by paradoxes—and not only camouflaged, but also living from the spirit of the correctly understood paradox).⁴³ Or, as de Man concludes his discussion of *Über das Marionettentheater*, we are caught in “the trap which is the ultimate textual model of this and of all texts, the trap of an aesthetic education.”⁴⁴ That is to say, at the heart of an aesthetic education lies the experience of the inability to reduce fundamental paradoxes, the inability to reduce the text to one unitary reading.

III: ÜBER DAS MARIONETTENTHEATER AS MOST CONVINCINGLY PERFORMATIVE OF KANT'S AESTHETIC

Although Kant and Han disagree upon the location of the beautiful (for Kant it is found in self-reflection and for Han it is external to the self), the ambiguous and uncognised nature of the purposive is valued by both authors. Therefore, *Über das Marionettentheater*, by resisting cognition, enacting this ambiguity, and demonstrating the purposive, provides itself as a medium for both philosophies. The question is whether *Über das Marionettentheater* is more supportive of Han's model or of Kant's. Because the distinction between Kant and Han lies in the location of the beautiful as self-reflective and externally located respectively, it is now necessary to reflect on where *Über das Marionettentheater* demonstrates the beautiful as existing.

The perspective presented by the characters appears supportive of Han. To read the text at the level of the characters' opinions would mean, as earlier demonstrated, to agree with Herrn C. that the beautiful is located less in the viewing subject than in a marionette, an external object. Here, the object is serving not as a medium for the viewing subject's self-reflection (as Kant would deem necessary), but rather it transcends self-consciousness and the related issues of self-reflectivity (as Han would deem necessary). Read in this way, the text supports Han's location of the beautiful as external; as drawing the subject out of self-reflection. This reading is also supported by the scene involving the boy in front of the mirror, because the narrator

ultimately presents the boy as a narcissistic fool, his self-consciousness destroying his grace. *Über das Marionettentheater* therefore appears to support Han's location of the beautiful externally to the subject.

However, the unreliability of the characters leaves us in a position of uncertainty from which we experience the aesthetic trap discussed above. If one follows Kant, the aesthetic trap affords a transient moment of purposive freedom, as we allow numerous potential interpretations to simultaneously coexist. Urpeth supports this argument when he agrees with another critic, John Sallis, suggesting that "the supervenient purposiveness does not eliminate the discord; it does not simply dissolve it but rather *is* precisely a purposiveness *of* that very discord."⁴⁵ Greiner also supports this argument, highlighting the necessity of indirectness in *Über das Marionettentheater*, even linking it with a presentation of Kant:

vor Augen gestellt werden – im Sinne der Kantischen "Hypotypose" ... [dass] das "Mal" der Nicht-Differenz im ihn unhintergehbaren Raum der Differenz eingeschrieben ist, notwendig nur indirect.⁴⁶

(we are shown—in the sense of the Kantian "Hypotypose"—that the "instance" of the non-balance is inscribed in the necessary space of the balance; by necessity, this is presented indirectly.)

Regardless of whether one follows de Man and Han, or keeps with Kant, I argue that Kleist is enacting the paradox, drawing the reader's attention to the unstable nature of this aesthetic experience.⁴⁷

But the significance of the untrustworthiness of Herr C. and the narrator takes us further still. The reading presented above, whereby reading itself excludes us from grace, is based upon the assumption that the characters are correct in their definition of grace and affectation. But, as demonstrated, they are unreliable. Consequently, we are left unsure of whether this reflection upon the nature of reading is a trap or, rather, whether the text advocates the opposite perspective to that of its characters, suggesting that reflection upon the nature of our interaction with the text is in fact a way out. Read this way, the text supports Kant's idea, whereby the medium encourages self-reflection upon one's cognitive faculties at play during reading. Following Mehigan's argument, a reading of *Über das Marionettentheater* as performative of Kant's aesthetic would hardly appear surprising: "Kleist seeks no alternative to the fundamental terms of the new knowledge paradigm that has come down to him. These terms are broadly Kantian."⁴⁸ Rehberg discusses how Kant's purposive could be enacted: "a very particular response is called for, namely one

which relates the possible richness of a philosophical text to the issue of its essential ambiguity.”⁴⁹ Her interpretation of Kant’s purposive therefore supports my reading of *Über das Marionettentheater* as performative of the purposive, due to the text’s ambiguities. It is this very resistance to subsumption under concepts that epitomises Kant’s aesthetic, as Howard Caygill argues when describing Kant’s aesthetic as occurring “where the nature of the experience described most resists the representational model of consciousness.”⁵⁰ Ambiguity—resistance to readability—turns the text into a parody of the very activity of reading. In his analysis of Kant, Michael Bowles also supports an interpretation of ambiguity as performative of Kant’s beautiful, suggesting that it is achieved “by way of the failure of the understanding.”⁵¹ Imagination is essential for Kant’s beautiful which, as Urpeth likewise argues, represents the “futile attempt to present the ‘indemonstrable’ ideas of reason”; to “present the unrepresentable.”⁵² *Über das Marionettentheater*, by taunting us with the challenge of finding comprehensibility, confronts us with the experience of the purposive, allowing us to experience, as opposed to merely understand, Kant’s aesthetic.

The ambiguities in *Über das Marionettentheater* place the reader in a position from which they can experience a purposive observation of the medium, as during Kant’s judgement of the beautiful. By thrusting the reader into this purposive state, Kleist’s text encourages us, in a similar fashion to that outlined by Kant, to reflect upon our cognitive faculties engaged during interaction with the text as medium. *Über das Marionettentheater* (or any other text, for that matter) cannot be guaranteed to elicit a moment of Kant’s beautiful. Even though Kant considers this state universal, one cannot guarantee it to be triggered by any given object for all viewing subjects.⁵³ Nonetheless, *Über das Marionettentheater* not only provides an elaborate literary metaphor which aids us in understanding Kant’s aesthetic, it also taunts us with double meanings, ambiguities, and ironies which, provided one recognises the double meaning, places one in a position in which an unambiguous cognition of the text is resisted—our perceptions remain purposive. In a similarly performative reading, de Man argues that Kleist could be seen to have failed in what he set out to achieve if we reach a point at which we understand his text.⁵⁴ By encouraging reflection on the nature of reading, the text prompts us to reflect upon our cognitive faculties at play, in much the same way as outlined in Kant’s aesthetic.

Readers are thus placed in a state of imaginative free play, in which multiple readings coexist and one is encouraged to consider the nature of reading and the very nature of one’s cognitive faculties. Furthermore, by representing both perspectives

(Han's and Kant's), Kleist highlights contrasting readings, bringing the question of reading into focus. *Über das Marionettentheater* is held perhaps most easily in an intuitive comprehension that allows for both Kant and Han. But by presenting itself as readable in line with the ideas of Kant and Han (that is, in line with multiple philosophies), it further supports the Kantian aesthetic of the purposive, whereby one discrete cognition is resisted and we reflect upon our cognitive processes during reading.

Furthermore, it seems as if *Über das Marionettentheater*, whilst being an elaborate literary metaphor for Kant's idea of the purposive, in fact anticipates Han's counterargument. Because Kleist provides at least an element of Han's critique of Kant—namely the issue of self-consciousness as excluding the subject from grace, in Kleist's terminology, or from the mystical "other" in Han's—the texts of both Kleist and Han provide some resistance to Kant's aesthetic. However, *Über das Marionettentheater*, in contrast to Kant's and Han's philosophical texts, uses literary techniques of metaphor, ambiguity, irony, intradiegetic narrative, and "performance," as tools for grappling with the contrasts in perspective between Kant and Han. Due to the performative aspects of *Über das Marionettentheater*, the text supports a view of the beautiful as located within the purposive, self-reflective experience of the subject. This does not make the subject purely self-reflective at the expense of all interaction with externality, indeed the purposive requires interaction with "other" potential ways of viewing the medium. This purposiveness is, I argue, the bridge between Kant and Han. Insofar as Kant and Han agree upon the purposive, Kleist's text appears supportive of both their arguments. However, the text's double readability—the very existence of these two potential readings—enacts not only the purposive, but also encourages contemplation upon reading itself and our cognitive faculties at play. *Über das Marionettentheater* serves as medium triggering reflection upon the reading process itself, just as it has done in this discussion. Therefore, a self-reflective rather than an externalising process is encouraged and the text is more supportive of Kant's aesthetic. *Über das Marionettentheater* offers itself, to the reader, as a trigger for an experience of the beautiful in Kantian terms.

IV: CONCLUSION

This article discussed Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Heinrich von Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, and Byung-Chul Han's *Die Errettung des Schönen*, considering Kleist's text as a medium for the philosophical theories of Kant and Han. The metaphors, paradoxes, ambiguities, and ironies—the literary techniques of *Über*

das Marionettentheater—illustrate an openness to multiple interpretations. The text does not dictate whether the beautiful exists in the subject (Kant), or in the object (Han), but rather it opens a space for the reader to experience the ambiguity of a purposive observation in which both interpretive options coexist. Whereas Kant clearly specifies a subject-centred, self-reflective aesthetic experience and Han, by contrast, advocates a transition towards externalisation and transcendence of this self-reflective aesthetic, Kleist presents both options. But, as demonstrated, the stated opinion of the characters, which correspond more closely to Han's external model, does not convincingly represent the meta-narrative of the text itself, which I identify as performative of the Kantian aesthetic. This ambiguity, regarding the text's advocacy upon the location of the beautiful—externally or self-reflectively—encourages a specific experience for the reader.

The text's resistance to readability places the reader in a paradoxical position: the frustration of our cognitive abilities during our search for intelligibility prompts self-consciousness about our reading process. This is the instantiation of aesthetic education, as de Man understands it. For as long as we fail to understand the text, Kleist brings us into this aesthetic balance of irreducible contradictions. Self-consciousness, and reading, are themselves presented as destructive of grace. We appear trapped. However, even this proposition—that self-consciousness destroys grace—is presented as questionable, due to the unreliability of the characters who propose this theory. In this way we become aware of the trap in which we are caught, whilst also questioning the legitimacy of the trap itself. And so, in line with de Man's interpretation, the text brings this aesthetic education into being.⁵⁵ We lack an objective measure within the world of the text and are forced into a simultaneous apprehension of numerous potential cognitions of the text, whilst reflecting upon our cognitive faculties at play during this purposive experience. Therefore, by encouraging numerous purposive apprehensions and resisting collapse into one specific interpretation, *Über das Marionettentheater* encourages an experience of a Kantian aesthetic judgement with the resistance to interpretation that the purposive implies. This literary presentation of Kant's aesthetic theory is much like Derrida's philosophical deconstructionist approach to literary analysis, as demonstrated in his discussion of Kant, which reveals the relative nature of meaning and the coexistence of irreconcilable contradictions.⁵⁶ Finally, as *Über das Marionettentheater* demonstrates in relation to Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and Han's *Die Errettung des Schönen*, literature can enact aesthetic theory, bringing into existence a particular

dynamic between text and reader; performing the ideas in the philosophical texts discussed, at the heart of which lies the coexistence of irreducible contradictions.

If *Über das Marionettentheater* is open to and can support either aesthetic, then Han is not so far removed from Kant's aesthetic as he claims. Although Han wishes to contradict Kant, he does not provide a true challenge of the purposive, which underpins Kant's aesthetic. By illustrating that Kleist's text is open to and can support both theories, I have problematised the way in which Han attempts to distinguish himself from Kant's aesthetic. As I have shown, Han argues that Kant's aesthetic is self-reflective and that an aesthetic of the beautiful must, by contrast, be externalising. Yet fundamental ambiguity in fact lies at the heart of both Kant's and Han's theories and this ambiguity most likely leads, as is the case with *Über das Marionettentheater*, to a self-reflective experience. Therefore, whilst representing the ambiguity in both Kant's and Han's aesthetics, *Über das Marionettentheater* more convincingly performs Kant's aesthetic by encouraging self-reflection. Therefore, a surface reading is consistent with Han, but the reading that I have outlined in this paper demonstrates the ambiguity of the text with the consequent self-reflection, which, in turn, can be read as embodying, in art, Kant's aesthetic.

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NOTES

¹ In *Transparenzgesellschaft*, Han connects Kant's ideas with Kleist's text. He agrees that grace occurs when "the economy of purpose" is escaped—that is, during what Kant calls a purposive state, which will be discussed in more detail shortly. When discussing nudity and pornography as destroying grace and transcending into purpose, Han illustrates his ideas with a discussion of Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*: the boy, he argues, loses his grace "gerade in dem Moment, in dem er vor dem Spiegel steht und seine Bewegungen eigens zur Schau stellt" (at

the very moment when he stands before the mirror and makes a show of his movements to himself). Evidently, Han considers Kleist's text to be demonstrating a transition into the purpose-driven, a terminology clearly Kantian. Byung-Chul Han, *Transparenzgesellschaft* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2013), 39–40. English translation taken from: Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 23.

² Ingo Breuer, ed., *Kleist Handbuch: Leben-Werk-Wirkung* (Stuttgart: J.B.Metzler, 2009).

³ Tim Mehigan, *Heinrich von Kleist: Writing after Kant* (New York: Camden House, 2011), 6.

⁴ Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁵ Léo Freuler, *Métaphysique et morale de Descartes à Kant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 2, 1998), 219. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁶ Corey Dyck, "Kant's Transcendental Deduction and the Ghosts of Descartes and Hume," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2011): 475. doi: 10.1080/09608788.2011.563522

⁷ Mehigan, *Heinrich von Kleist*, 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft und Schriften zur Naturphilosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1957), 299.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 65.

¹¹ Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 299.

¹² Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 65.

¹³ Jim Urpeth, "A 'Sacred Thrill': Presentation and Affectivity in the Analytic of the Sublime," in *The Matter of Critique, Readings in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Andrea Rehberg and Rachel Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 65.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Andrea Rehberg, *The Joy of Judgement, The Matter of Critique, Readings in Kant's Philosophy* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 1000), 103.

¹⁶ Byung-Chul Han, *Die Errettung des Schönen* (Frankfurt am Main: S Fischer Verlag, 2015), 13; all translations of this text are my own.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 78.

¹⁹ Ibid., 55.

²⁰ To talk of "ends" in the context of the purposive seems inappropriate: Kant's purposive state is identified by its very nature as not ends-driven and Han criticises Kant's purposive for doing the work of being pre-purpose, or leading to purpose. Ironically, it seems they both value the purposive, yet it fulfils different "purposes" in their respective arguments. Ibid., 29–30.

²¹ Notably, Han describes objects as resisting interpretation, whereas Kant discusses the subject as doing so. This exemplifies the authors' respective object and subject foci.

- ²² Chris Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 252.
- ²³ Christian-Paul Berger, *Bewegungsbilder Kleists Marionettentheater* (München: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), xiii.
- ²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 49.
- ²⁵ Heinrich von Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," in *Heinrich von Kleist Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. Klaus Müller-Salget (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990), 557; Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 3, (1972): 23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1144768>
- ²⁶ Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," 559.
- ²⁷ Following the terminology of Gérard Genette, the homodiegetic narrator is a narrator who is present as a character in the story he tells. Here, this is in an internal narrative, the intradiegetic narrative, that finds itself inside an external narrative, the extradiegetic narrative. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 228–234.
- ²⁸ Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," 561.
- ²⁹ Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre", 25.
- ³⁰ Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," 561; Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre", 25.
- ³¹ De Man makes a similar argument: the "diegetic narratives ... [emphasise] the self-consciousness of the representational mode ... [problematising] the relationship between a rhetoric and a hermeneutics of persuasion ... one is no longer in the same way persuaded of its persuasiveness." De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 269.
- ³² Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," 556; Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre", 22.
- ³³ See, for example: Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," 556. The criticism of affectation supports Kant's purposive, because a state of affectation requires an already existing conception of what one is trying to achieve, thus no longer purposive. Herr C., however, hypocritically enacts that which he criticises.
- ³⁴ Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," 563; Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," 26.
- ³⁵ De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 275.
- ³⁶ Bernhard Greiner, *Kleists Dramen und Erzählungen* (Tübingen und Basel: Francke Verlag, 2000), 214.
- ³⁷ Ingo Breuer, *Kleist Handbuch: Leben-Werk-Wirkung* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2009), 154–155.
- ³⁸ Breuer, *Kleist Handbuch*, 154–155.
- ³⁹ Greiner, *Kleists Dramen und Erzählungen*, 216.
- ⁴⁰ Kleist, "Über das Marionettentheater," 559.
- ⁴¹ Simon Malpas, "Framing Infinities: Kantian Aesthetics After Derrida," in *The Matter of Critique: Readings in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Andrea Rehberg and Rachel Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 147.
- ⁴² Günter Figal, "Figuren der Unabsichtlichkeit: Heinrich von Kleists Über das Marionettentheater Wiedergelesen," in *Heinrich von Kleist Neue Absichten eines rebellischen Klassikers* ed. Werner Frick (Berlin: Rombach Verlag KG, 2014), 96.

⁴³ Beda Allemann, "Sinn und Unsinn von Kleists Gespräch 'Über das Marionettentheater,'" in *Kleist-Jahrbuch: im Auftrage des Vorstandes der Heinrich-von-Kleist-Gesellschaft*, Heinrich von Kleist Gesellschaft (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag: 1981–1982), 51.

⁴⁴ De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 290.

⁴⁵ Urpeth, "A 'Sacred Thrill,'" 62.

⁴⁶ Greiner, *Kleists Dramen und Erzählungen*, 217.

⁴⁷ They would appear to agree that Kant's purposive state does not truly transcend purpose insofar as it does the work of pre-purpose; it heads in the direction of the trap.

⁴⁸ Mehigan, *Heinrich von Kleist*, 6.

⁴⁹ Rehberg, *Heinrich von Kleist*, 93.

⁵⁰ Howard Caygill, "Life and Aesthetic Pleasure," in *The Matter of Critique: Readings in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Andrea Rehberg and Rachel Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 81.

⁵¹ Michael Bowles, "Kant and the Provocation of Matter," in *The Matter of Critique: Readings in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. Andrea Rehberg and Rachel Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 11.

⁵² Urpeth, "A 'Sacred Thrill,'" 62.

⁵³ Even *Über das Marionettentheater*, which I argue encourages a purposive state through its ambiguities, cannot guarantee the purposive because the reader may choose, for instance, to believe the meaning of the text to be conveyed merely by the arguments of the narrator and Herr C.

⁵⁴ De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 282.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, 37–83.